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## ABSTRACT

This study examined empirical research on shyness, inhibition, and social withdrawal published in "Child Development," "Developmental Psychology," and "Development and Psychopathology" between 1990 and 1996, focusing on: (1) conceptual definitions; (2) operational definitions; (3) agreement between conceptual and operational definitions within studies; and (4) agreement across studies. The sample was comprised of 32 articles whose titles included shy(ness), inhibit(ion), or withdraw(al); they were located through a CD-ROM PsycLIT search. Conceptual definitions and individual components of the operational definitions were categorized. Results indicated that withdrawal was not well-defined operationally or conceptually; only four studies (33 percent) included conceptual definitions and there was little inter-study agreement. Forty-two percent of the operational definitions included items not fitting the conceptual definition. Inhibition was more consistently defined conceptually and operationally. Seventy-five percent of the inhibition studies specified conceptual definitions, and there was considerable inter-study agreement. Fifty-six percent included a temperamental component. No study included measures inconsistent with the conceptual definition. Only two studies used the term shyness and neither specified a conceptual definition. Overall, withdrawal was a nebulous construct and often seemed to serve as a "catch-all" category for various types of internalizing problems. The inhibition construct was relatively clear and distinct. The lack of clarity regarding withdrawal implies that its literature should not be taken at face value. (The 33 studies reviewed are listed. An appendix outlines the operational definition components. Two figures graphically display findings. Contains nine references.) (KDFB)

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By Any Other Name: Differences Among  
Shyness, Inhibition, and Social Withdrawal in the Literature

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Poster presented at the April, 1997 meeting of the  
Society for Research in Child Development

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By Any Other Name: Differences Among  
Shyness, Inhibition, and Social Withdrawal in the Literature

Children's tendencies to limit their interactions go by many names in the psychological literature and take on subtly different forms. Researchers seem to agree that distinctions should be made, but disagree on what they should be.

For example, in a recent book entitled *Social Withdrawal, Inhibition, and Shyness in Childhood*, the editors explain that social withdrawal is an “umbrella term” that covers three constructs: Shyness, inhibition and passive social withdrawal (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Specifically, shyness involves an approach-avoidance conflict, with shy children being motivated to both approach and avoid social interaction; inhibition is fear of the unfamiliar; and passive social withdrawal is an unconflictual preference for solitary activity, in which children might be goal oriented rather than people oriented.

These definitions make good intuitive sense. However, later in the same volume another contributor describes three components, or “core aspects” of shyness: Transient fear of the unfamiliar, shyness, and social withdrawal (Engfer, 1993). Transient fear of the unfamiliar, according to this author, is a common reaction to strangers that develops in the first year. If this becomes a consistent way of responding to strangers, then “shyness” has developed. Social withdrawal involves “staying remote from peers” or “difficulty making friends.” This author’s shyness is equivalent to Rubin and Asendorpf’s inhibition. This author’s social withdrawal is equivalent to either passive social withdrawal or shyness as defined by Rubin and Asendorpf.

At first one might think that these names and definitions are not very important. However, when the questions are “what are the developmental paths into a given construct (X)?” or “what are the consequences of X?” then we can get very different answers depending upon which measured construct happens to be labeled X in that particular study. For instance, in longitudinal studies of delinquency, shyness and similar constructs seemed to act as protective factors in some studies (Blumstein, Farrington, & Moitra, 1984; Ensminger, Kellam, & Rubin, 1983; Tremblay, Pihl, Vitaro, & Dobkin, 1994) and as risk factors in others (Kellam, Simon, & Ensminger, 1983;

McCord, 1987; Moskowitz & Schwartzman, 1989). However, the empirical definitions of the constructs that proved to be protective, whatever they were called, seemed to tap fear of the unfamiliar. And in a sample of boys, such fear appeared to be protective, whereas nonfearful withdrawal from interaction appeared to increase risk of delinquency (Kerr, Tremblay, Pagani-Kurtz, & Vitaro, in press).

This review looks at 32 studies of shyness, inhibition, and social withdrawal published in *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, and *Development and Psychopathology* from 1990 through 1996. It focuses on (1) how they conceptualize the term; (2) how they operationally define the term; (3) agreement between conceptual and operational definitions within studies; and (4) agreement across studies.

## Method

### Sample of studies

The sample comprises 32 articles that were published in *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, or *Development and Psychopathology* between January, 1990 and December, 1996, and whose titles included shy(ness), inhibit(ion), or withdraw(al). They were located through a CD-ROM PsycLIT search (EBSCO Industries Inc., 1996, Version 5.0).

### Procedure

The tendency to limit social interactions could be conceptualized in a number of ways. Drawing upon the literature in this area, we developed a framework for organizing various possible conceptualizations of limited social or nonsocial interactions, as depicted in the figures. Using this framework, we categorized the conceptual definitions of the terms used in these studies as well as the individual components of their operational definitions (see Appendix 1). Items that did not fit within this framework were categorized as "other," and those for which all or part of the operational definitions were not fully described were termed "unclassifiable."

## Results

### Withdrawal

Withdrawal was not well defined either operationally or conceptually. Only 4 studies (33%) included conceptual definitions. Among those, there was little agreement, as shown in Figure 1. One was very general, specifying only low frequency of interaction. The other 3 specifically ruled out peer rejection, but differed on whether the child seemed to desire interaction or not. Furthermore, even though these 3 conceptual definitions ruled out peer-rejection, 50% of the withdrawal studies included measures of peer rejection or neglect in their operational definitions, as shown in Figure 2. The operational definitions included items that represented up to 6 different conceptualizations in our framework and 42% included items that did not fit within the framework at all, such as "worries," "tired," or "neutral expression, doesn't smile or laugh."

### Inhibition

Inhibition was more consistently defined both conceptually and operationally. Seventy-five percent of the inhibition studies specified conceptual definitions, and there was considerable agreement among them, as shown in Figure 1. Fifty-six percent included a temperamental component. As shown in Figure 2, no study included measures that represented more than 3 different conceptualizations. Moreover, no study included measures that were inconsistent with their conceptual definitions, such as peer rejection or nonanxious isolation.

### Shyness

Only 2 studies were found that used the term shyness. Neither specified a conceptual definition.

## Discussion

Withdrawal, as used in these studies, was a nebulous construct. It often seemed to serve as a "catch-all" category for various types of internalizing problems. By contrast, the inhibition construct was relatively clear and distinct. Most researchers seemed to agree about the nature of inhibition and its behavioral manifestations.

This lack of clarity regarding withdrawal implies that the literature on withdrawal should not be taken at face value. More work should be done to determine what we really mean by "withdrawal," as well as whether it is actually distinct from "inhibition." One possible distinction would be to conceptualize withdrawal as a *nonanxious* retreat from social interaction and inhibition as an *anxious* retreat from social interaction. When this was done in a recent study, the two constructs had very different implications for the risk of future delinquency (Kerr, et al., in press.) Once these theoretical distinctions are made, other practical implications of different types of limited interactions might become apparent.

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## Appendix 1: Placement of operational definition components in our framework

**Low frequency, low intensity, or delayed interaction with people, objects, or situations**

- has few friends
- has very few friends
- doesn't join in games on the playground
- doesn't play with very many kids.
- unoccupied behavior
- onlooking behavior
- Percentage of silence in interaction with stranger (8-10)
- person plays alone rather than with others
- Person whose feelings get hurt easily and is usually alone.
- Person who was alone and didn't play with other kids. A child is usually alone
- doesn't play much with other kids
- conversation with peer (-)
- number of observations in which child was alone & looking at another child (in school obs)
- number of observations in which child was in social interaction
- number of observations in which child was talking with another person
- has very few friends
- remains apart, isolated from the group
- inactive, watches others play

**Peer-initiated**

- student gets willing cooperation from most other students
- student easily attracts the positive attention from other classmates
- goes unnoticed in a group
- usually chosen last to join in a group
- isn't noticed much by other kids
- "direct statements of rejection"
- last person picked for group activities.
- is not noticed much by others
- gets scared easily
- is not usually asked to play in games
- can't get others to listen to her

**Self-initiated**

- observer-rated sociability in response to 8 observer behaviors during a home visit + observer's overall impression rated:  
1="quite unfriendly, fussy, fearful" through  
9="very friendly, outgoing, spontaneously smiling and/or talking to the examiner"
- instances of stopping before reaching them and instances of at least looking for 3 seconds before speaking
- observations of child playing with a peer at home: number of 15-sec intervals coded 0=no play out of 30 mins
- Latency to first spontaneous utterance
- Teacher rating of child's inhibition in class 1=not at all; 9=very much
- latency of the child's first request of a play partner

- is really shy around others
- doesn't ask others to play
- is really shy; spends a lot of time alone
- very shy
- is quieter than other kids
- shyness
- student tries to be with another person or group of people
- likes to take part in activities with others
- makes the first friendly move, doesn't wait for others
- enjoys being with others
- doesn't talk or interact during group activities
- long latencies to interact
- hardly ever raises hand in class
- retreat from people or objects
- proximity to mother
- silence or not playing
- latency to leave parent
- latency to touch first object
- percentage of time w/in arm's reach of parent
- Retreat to parent
- latency to interact with strange object
- latency to leave parent, etc.
- frequency to approach another child, being w/in arm's reach of another child, & entering a plastic tunnel
- average latency to touch first toy
- latency to vocalize
- time spent in proximity to mother
- Latency to vocalize and approach to stranger and robot
- time spent in proximity to mother when stranger presents truck and robot
- long latencies to interact with strange adults
- retreat from strange objects
- proximity to mother for long periods
- silence or not playing
- is child sometimes shy with other child?
- is the child shy with other child?
- is the child shy with strange adults?
- initial adjustment to the laboratory situation
- emotional dependence on mother
- positive social response to experimenter
- social confidence.
- direct physical contact with mother
- time spent in other room
- not seeking or initiating with mother
- latency to enter into other room
- direct contact with mother
- not seeking or initiating
- withdrawal from stranger to mother
- child doesn't touch objects, play or walk around
- child plays with toys or objects and walks around apartment (reversed)
- latency to enter another room
- child touching mother, child in other room, child not seeking or initiating contact with mother.
- retreat from or ignoring stranger
- staring
- onlooker

- unoccupied
- someone who acts shy around other kids
- long latencies to interact with unfamiliar adults
- retreat from unfamiliar person or object
- cessation of playing or vocalization
- clinging to mother & fretting or crying
- spontaneous comments to examiner
- gross motor movements (avr coded from video of the sessions)
- latency to make 1st approach
- latency to play
- time proximal to mother
- time staring at other child
- mother-rated shyness: 3-pt scale:
  - 1 = outgoing
  - 2 = a little shy
  - 3 = extremely shy
- spending at least 9 min within arm's reach of mother & not playing
- speaking for first time "late" in the session
- shy--this child acts very shy with other kids & seems always to work or play by themselves--it's hard to get to know them
- latency
  - to leave mother
  - approach toys
  - approach stranger
  - approach an unfamiliar object
- total time spent proximal to mother.
- very shy
- person is shy

### **Child might want interaction, but is anxious or conflicted**

- someone who plays alone a lot and works alone most of the time. It seems as if the person is nervous around other kids
- student lacks the courage to seek help from other students regarding schoolwork or withdraws when others seek help from him
- timid, afraid, avoids new situations
- how does the child behave with strangers?
- how does the child behave with strange adults?
- how does the child behave with strange peers?
- nervousness (in social setting)
- passive ignoring or retreat from stranger, but not to mother
- wary, hesitant response to stranger
- appropriate, comfortable interaction with stranger
- anxious, wary affect (timid, fearful)
- anxious, wary or sad expressions
- wary, hesitant interactions
- appropriate comfortable interaction (during 30 second intervals of interacting with stranger.)
- showing "wariness" when confronted with novelty
- shyness
  - 1="exceptionally easy & quick social contacts, enjoys meeting new people"
  - 5="acute discomfort to the point of panic in social situations"

**Child doesn't want interaction; no anxiety or conflict**

- rather play alone than with others

**Child might want interaction, but is anxious or conflicted—physiological basis**

- high, stable heart rate
- heart rate + latencies to interact with people and objects

**Other—items that did not fit within the framework**

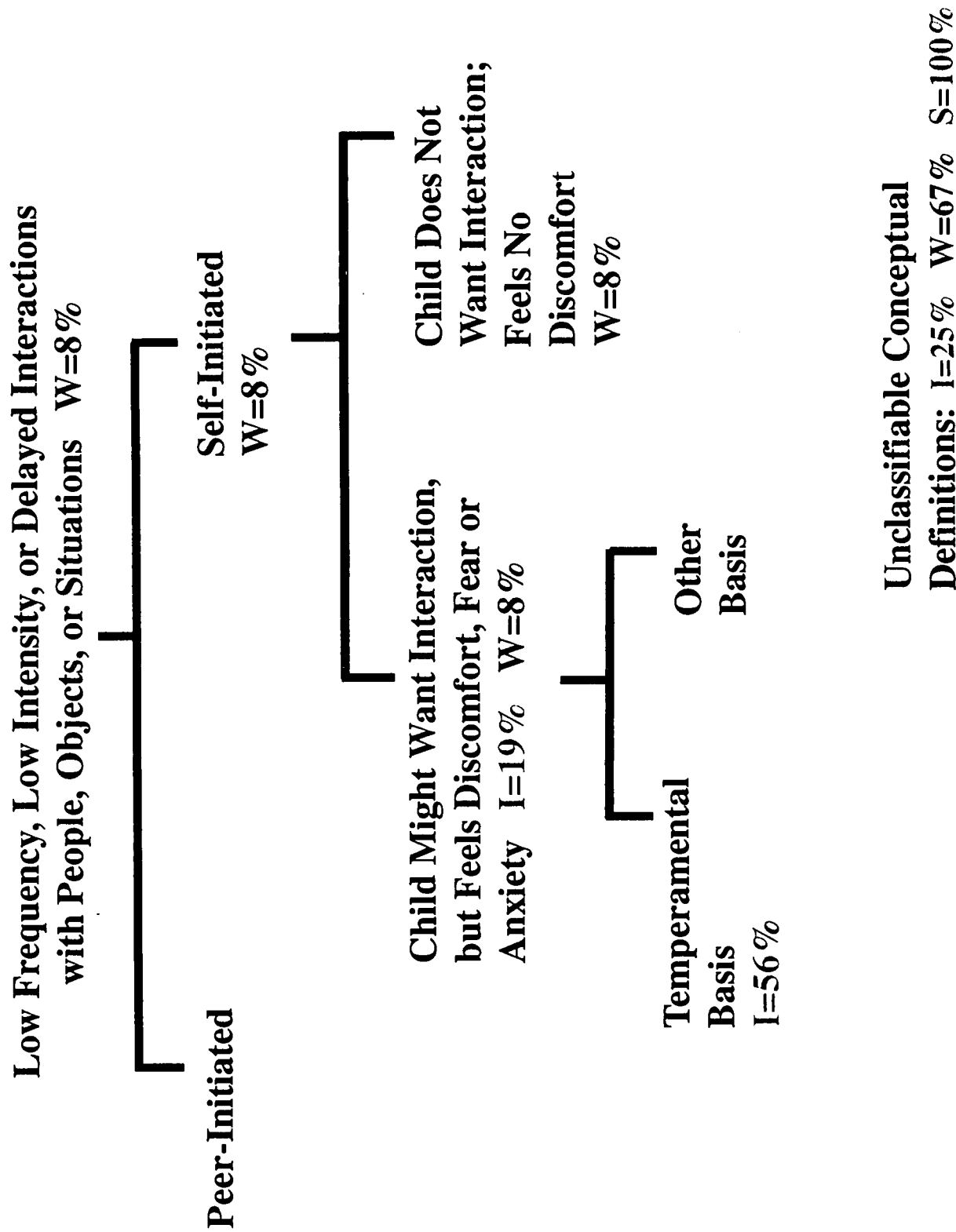
- feels sad a lot
- isn't noticed much by others
- thinks she is not good at much
- gives in easily when others want their own way
- feelings can be hurt easily.
- doesn't have fun when she is with others
- frequency of negative affect during above episodes.
- feelings are easily hurt
- sad, apathetic affect (withdrawn, flat, sad).
- feelings get hurt easily
- usually sad
- reserve
  - 1="spontaneous & uninhibited expression of integrated feelings"
  - 5="emotional inhibition that produces feelings of strain & awkwardness in others"
- gets scared easily
- gives up when things get hard
- someone whose feelings get hurt easily
- gives in when other kids want to do things their way
- thinks he is not good at much
- cries for nothing
- sad, unhappy, or depressed
- worries
- tired
- neutral expression, doesn't smile or laugh
- anxiety
- oversensitivity
- negative perceptions of social competence
- rambunctiousness
- aggressiveness
- disruptiveness
- immaturity

**Unclassifiable because items not fully described**

- teacher-nominations: internalizing and externalizing factors from the PBQ—no description of items
- Class Play nominations on 4 items that represent passive isolation—no description of items
- factor scores for a shyness-anxiety factor on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale—no description of items

- 11 withdrawal items from several peer Assessment instruments
- Correlation between teacher's Q-sort for subject and Q-sort for a prototypic "shy-inhibited child"
- An 8-item parent-rated inhibition scale
  - One item was "My child is shy toward unknown children" (7-pt scale; never-always)
  - None of the other items were described.
- Correlation between teacher's Q-sort for the child and teachers' Q-sorts for a prototypic "shy-inhibited" child.
- a 17-item "fear" subscale of Rothbart's IBQ--parent-rated
- Solitary-active and solitary-passive play: "generated according to the definitions given by Rubin . . . "

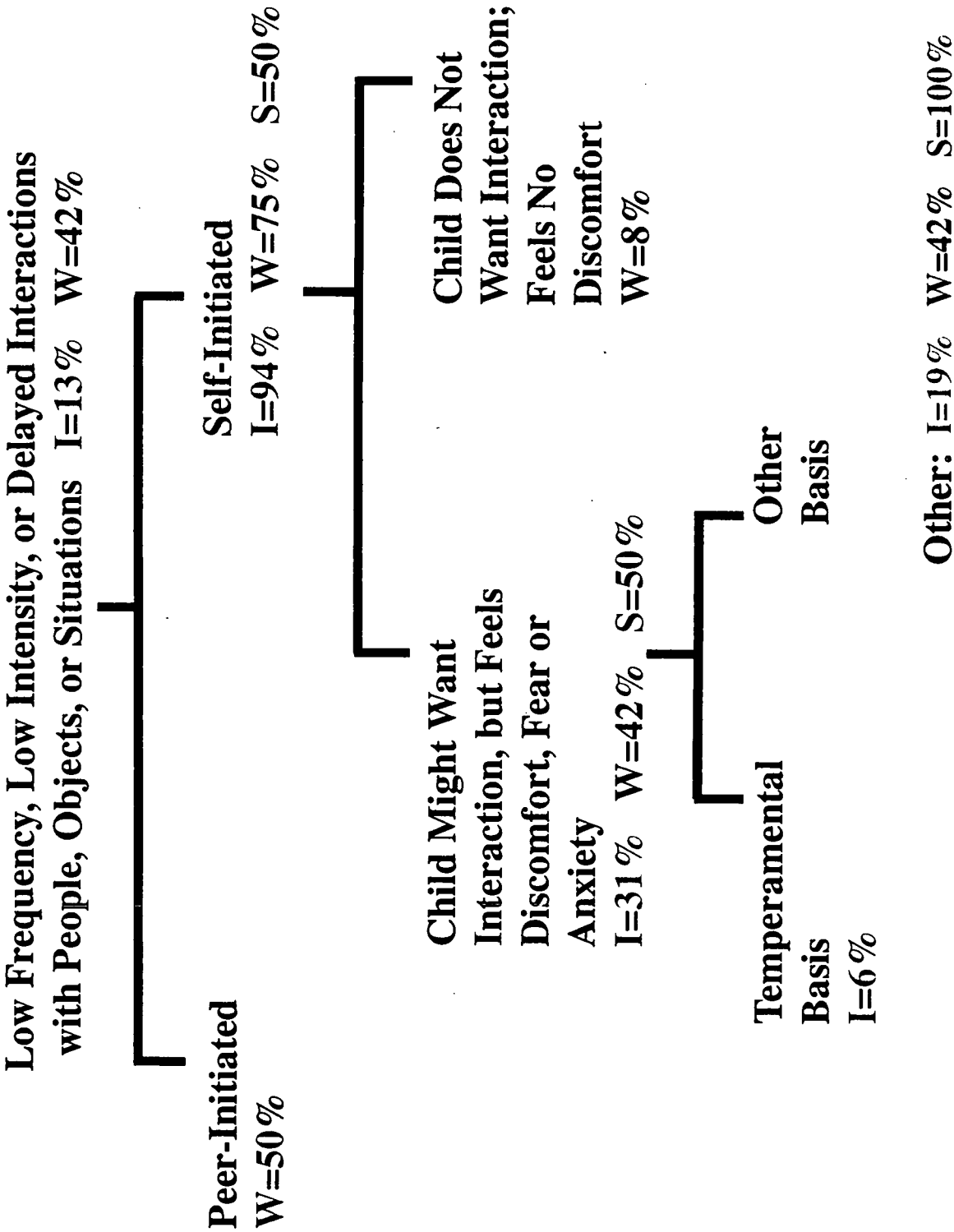
**Figure 1: Conceptual Definitions**



I(n=16) W(n=12) S(n=2)



**Figure 2: Operational Definitions**



**I(n=16) W(n=12) S(n=2)**

**Unclassifiable Operational**

**Definitions: I=38% W=25%**



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